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Chinese Studies Library Collections in the Digital Age

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Summary

There are at least 3 major commercial e-book and 4 e-journal service providers in China today providing full-text access to over 80% of core academic serial publications and almost a million Chinese books, over 2/3 of all the books issued since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. There are currently some technical and commercial difficulties that prevent us from providing access to them in Western libraries. If we can overcome those difficulties and exploit the databases in full, it will have a major impact on the way the research on China conducted, Chinese studies library collections and the Chinese studies library profession in the West. In this paper, I will analyze the current state of major Chinese e-book and e-journal services, their technical characteristics and possible use of these resources by Chinese studies libraries in the West to improve the information provision to their users.

Background

There are many small to medium but vital collections of modern Chinese studies library material in many European research libraries. The collections vary in size from 20,000 to 200,000 volumes and are overwhelmingly in print copies. The primary purpose of it is to support teaching and research in those European countries of China by a small but growing number of students and researchers. The Chinese subject librarians and academics responsible for the development and maintenance of the collection face many difficult issues today. It is becoming increasingly difficult for libraries outside of East Asia to have a comprehensive East Asian teaching and research collection covering all major aspects of humanities and social science publications in order to fulfill their mission as stated. The number and variety of publications from China and Chinese speaking regions has been increasing at an explosive rate in recent years requiring a similar increase in staff time and financial resources on the selection and acquisition of library stock. The access to the collection is hampered with difficulties in using IT technology that handles East Asian characters in Western language computer operating systems. Most library systems used by European libraries today are incapable of handling East Asian characters and catalogue records are in Romanization only. Differences in Romanization practices and the inherent problem caused by representing East Asian characters with a 26-alphabet Roman phonetic character set makes the usage of the Romanized catalogues and indexes very limited. East Asian language CD-ROMs and other electronic publications become problem ridden once the products are put into use in a Western language computer operating system and the libraries do not have the resources and technological know-how to use or preserve them. Although the number of users of East Asian library collection has been on the increase for many years, it is still comparatively small and doesn't attract large enough financial resource to cover the above increase in staff time and book fund allocation or investment in technology.

With the rapid development of computer and Internet industries and the dramatic increase in the number of Internet users in China in recent years, the Chinese electronic publishing industry has also joined in late 1990's and making steady progress in providing online access to vast amount of Chinese books and journals for worldwide readers. Today there are at least 3 major commercial e-book libraries and 4 e-journal service providers in mainland China. The latest figure from the Superstar Digital Library, one of the e-book libraries, states that it provides full-text online access to over 800,000 Chinese book titles, two third of the 1.2 million monograph publications published in China since 1949. The e-journal service provider, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) provides full-text access to over 5,500 current journal titles as well as 430 newspaper titles covering over 80 per cent of the core academic journal and newspaper publications. With the internet as the vehicle, these services drastically simplify and speed up the procedure for accessing quality information sources which are otherwise difficult to obtain or unobtainable by many people, especially people outside of China. The quantity and variety of materials included in those online services are much greater than those of Chinese language holdings in most Western Chinese studies libraries and if those resources are exploited in full, it will greatly enrich the information available to Western students and scholars of China, thus improving the quality of their work. While posing challenge to the traditional mode Chinese studies library services in the West, the developments in electronic publishing in China complement those services and bring about great opportunities for students, researchers as well as Chinese studies librarians.

Some characteristics of Chinese e-book and e-journal service providers

Rich in content but the content images and indexes are not always good quality. The electronic databases cover vast amount of full-text books and journals that are of potential value for wide ranging readership. They provide quick 24 hour/day access from anywhere in the world. The databases vary in coverage as well as technical quality. The image data in some of the book databases is of lower technical quality than others and the content is not as clear. The books and journals are usually scanned with low resolution scanners at a very fast speed. The search functions are basic and classification is done by staff without proper library training. The homepage of some databases are not very easy to navigate and the search function is often not in a prominent place.

Intellectual copyright protection. All Chinese e-book and e-journal services discussed in this paper are accumulative distributors/publishers of older books and journals. They buy or negotiate the rights from the original publishers or authors for online distribution. They then either turn the books and journals into digitized images by scanning them, like most resources in the Superstar Digital Library, or distribute them in full-text format a few months after the paper copies are issued. There are many issues involved here: the legal relationship between the author and original publisher, author and online distributor, publisher and online distributor about the intellectual copyright. This is a subject that attracted much heated discussion in China in recent years and it is still far from perfect (Zhou, Liu, Yang, 2003; Dai, 2003). There were two recent reported court cases relating to electronic copyright law where the defendants, VIP E-journal Data and China Digital Library, were forced to pay

large sums of compensation for breaching the intellectual copyright protection laws. This is a hopeful sign of improvement in this field but it is a small step in the right direction and much work still needs be done. Incomplete copyright protection mechanism hampers development of the electronic information industry and it is currently regarded as one of the most urgent issues to be solved in the development of Chinese electronic products (Dai, 2003).

Special viewing software. Each service provider offers different custom made viewing software for remotely accessing its resources. The viewing software is often designed to operate in a Chinese language computer operating environment and this seems to be one of the major obstacles for Western readers to utilize the resources as the software fail to function in a Western operating system. Even the ones specifically designed for use in non-Chinese operating systems need extra Chinese language support software and this configuration needs some expert knowledge and experience. The vendors don't seem to realize that the institutional IT networks in the West are highly centralized and most student users of the network are not able to install Chinese or any other computer software into the network by themselves, only people with administrative privileges can do this for them. This can be a complicated process with the librarians not knowing enough about computer technology and not having control of the computer network. The IT personnel do not know enough about the characteristics of Chinese language software programmes and because of the small amount of usage for these services it is not guaranteed that the installation and maintenance of viewing software gets the priority, if it ever be installed. It is difficult both financially and logistically for the Chinese companies to send technical personnel abroad to give technical support for their customers which often small in size and in terms of financial contribution to the companies.

Access models. There are differences in the way the access to electronic information is provided in China and in the West. There are many models of access to electronic information resources. The first is setting up a mirror site and providing local access service. This is the preferred model by most Chinese libraries as this is the only way of guaranteeing fast speed access to electronic resources. The network connection in many Chinese libraries is still too slow to download large image files like e-books and e-journals from a remote server (Li, 2003). It is a common practice in China that a vendor sets up a local mirror site at a library and sells all or selection of the contents of its e-book or e-journal database together with the server to this particular library. The libraries in China that have claimed to have a large collection of Chinese e-books or e-journals have done this way. These libraries have relevant IT expertise to maintain such a server and their computer systems are all in Chinese. In addition to this, the vendors can also send technical personnel to help with the problems the libraries may have and the telephone communication is also cheap and convenient. The written communication is conducted without the language barrier. As the vendors do not have direct experience of their potential overseas customers, the Chinese studies libraries, they expect the overseas Chinese studies libraries do the same as the libraries in China. The vendors do not realize that in most overseas libraries with Chinese studies collection in the West, there is a maximum of only one or two librarians work on China and in most cases the librarian is a subject specialist and not an IT technician. It is a rare scene in the West for a library to employ a Chinese IT specialist in order to provide support for accessing its resources. The second method is to hire Digital Island to provide database remote access with rental

charges paid by database vendors. The third method is to provide remote access directly via the Internet. The second and third access models are the preferred way of accessing Chinese digital resources by libraries in the West for obvious reasons. It requires minimal amount of technical, maintenance and preservation work and the libraries only pay for an access fee. The internet access to some of the resources is also fast (less than a minute to download the entire content of a Chinese book from the Superstar Digital Library). Many US and UK libraries have negotiated remote access to China Academic Journals database recently via a server at EastView Inc. in the U. S. or a server in China. It has taken some persuasion before a deal on prices could be reached and the CAJviewer was replaced by Adobe Reader. The final method is to buy the proprietary right to the raw data and developing an information retrieval platform

The price factor. Vendors do not realize or tend to ignore the fact that the number of Chinese language database users in Western institutions is much smaller than that in China and they expect the overseas customers pay the same or even higher price. Some vendors even hold an unrealistic view of the fiscal position of overseas Chinese studies libraries. They tend to inflate the prices for overseas customers in order to maximize their profit.

Keen interest but lack of experience of overseas market. With the exception of CNKI, all other service providers currently do not have major overseas customers. They lack direct experience of Western academic library and network environment and most of their products are designed for domestic use and function in a Chinese computer operating system. But they are keen to develop links with individuals and organizations overseas. Almost all of them expressed that they will modify their products to suite the overseas market if there is enough interest. Lack of communication between Chinese database vendors and Chinese studies librarians, researchers and students in the West was also clearly evident in a recent research visit to Beijing by the author.

Providing access to Chinese e-books and e-journals in a Western Chinese studies library

The providing information service for Chinese studies is just as complicated and wide as the subject of Chinese studies itself. The number of different book and periodical titles published in China in social science and humanities field every year greatly exceeds the capacity of most overseas Chinese studies libraries can afford to buy and process, thus leaving a big gap in the library collection. The quality and quantity of research material available to researchers has a major impact on the research outcome it is a crucial factor influencing the quality of research. Despite the shortcomings and special characteristics of Chinese e-book and e-journal databases mentioned in the previous section, it is the only form available to most of us to gain timely access to a proper research collection for our teaching and research work.

Priority should be given to improve communication between overseas Chinese studies librarians and Chinese database providers. It is in the interest of both overseas libraries and Chinese vendors to work together in order to make the e-book and e-journal databases available to users outside China. The librarian needs to be aware of

those databases and they need first hand experience in order to learn how they work in a non-Chinese environment. For Chinese database providers, they are still at an early stage in providing service to overseas customers and they are often unaware of our specification for electronic databases. It is important that we inform them of our requirements and difficulties accessing their resources.

The use of commonly used software in non-Chinese operating system, such as Adobe Acrobat Reader, will greatly simplify the way we access Chinese e-books and e-journals. The database service providers are often concerned about people making pirate copy for redistribution. The special viewers are security coded to stop this happening and this is the main reason why they don't use commonly used software to access the databases. We can overcome their concerns by reassuring them this is relatively rare in developed countries and the copyright protection laws are more rigorously enforced. In addition to that, even if someone tries to redistribute pirated e-books and e-journals in Chinese, the demand from the individual public for such products is negligible.

Another stumbling block for us to overcome is the access model. The local mirror site access model is not a viable option for most libraries in the Western world. Remote access from a commercial website, preferably from a server located in a Western country or at the service provider's headquarter in China is the way forward. The vendors have expressed their willingness to look into this if there is enough interest to justify the cost of running a server. Again we need to work together with them to make this happen.

The Chinese vendors often shown flexibility on the pricing of their products and many of the products are still inexpensive in Western standard. It is also possible to set up a suitable access account, such as pay-per-view or limited number of concurrent users, in order to reduce the cost.

Conclusion

Development of Chinese full-text digital book and journal databases will re-shape the future of Chinese collections in Western libraries, thus the research carried out by scholars and students. It provides us with opportunity to access vast amount of valuable research and teaching material. Many challenges still lie ahead in order to materialize the access the databases by Western students and scholars. A proactive approach by the Chinese studies librarians is necessary in order to make this happen.

Appendix:

Table 1

Latest title count of major Chinese full-text databases						
Name	No. of books	No. serial titles	No. of masters and PhD dissertations	No. of newspaper titles	No. of conference proceedings	Start year
Superstar	Ca. 800,000					Books older than 2 years
Scholar	Ca. 130,000 (mostly 1998-)					Mostly 1998-
Apabi	Ca. 30,000					Mostly 2000-
CNKI		Ca. 5,500 (1994-)	Ca. 60,000 (2000-)	430 (2000-)		
Wanfang		Ca. 3,000 (1998-)	Ca.		Ca. 170,000	
Renda Reprint Series		Ca. 110 series (mostly 1995-)				
VIP		Ca. 7,000 (1989-)				

Table 1. Source: Latest brochures by the vendors and data collected on a recent visit by the author.

Table 2

Summary of technical and other characteristics of Chinese databases				
Name	Major strength	Access	Viewing	Copyright model
Superstar	Books	Local host, Remote access to server in Beijing. Purchase of reader card required	SSReader, full Chinese version and limited English version. Printing limited to 10 pages at a time. Mostly scanned images of book content.	Mixed ways offering copyright owners free long term reader card, depositing funds with China Copyright Agency
Scholar	Books published since 1998	Local host	Special Viewer, only Chinese version available for download freely and the books downloaded can only be read again on the same computer. 20% content is in text version.	Contract with copyright owners.
Apabi	Books published since 2000 and most recent books	Local host	Special viewer available for download free of charge.	Contract with copyright owners.
CNKI	Journals, newspapers, academic dissertations	Remote access, Local host, Sale of raw data in CD/DVD- ROM	CAJViewer, Adobe Reader 5.0 with Chinese language support	Contract with copyright owners
Wanfang	Core science, technical and social science journals, conference proceedings	Remote access, Local host, Sale of raw data in CD/DVD ROM.	Adobe Acrobat Reader with Chinese language support	Contract with publishers.
Renda Reprint Series	Humanities and Social Science journals	Sale of data in CD-ROM.		Only organization with state granted special privilege to reprint and distribute selected journal articles without consent of the copyright owner on a non- for-profit base.
VIP	Journals	Local host, Remote access, Pay-per-view remote access, Sale of data in CD/DVD ROM.	Not known	Not known.

Table 3

Contact addresses and URLs		
Name	URL	Contact e-mail
Superstar Digital Library	http://www.ssreader.com	xiaoma@ssreader.com
Scholar Digital Library	http://www.21dmedia.com http://www.shusheng.net	Scb@shusheng.net
Apabi	http://www.apabi.com	He_sijia@founder.com.cn
CNKI	http://www.global.cnki.net http://online.eastview.com	Beijing@cnki.net zhanxr@cnki.net sales@eastview.com
Wanfang Data	http://www.wanfangdata.com.cn	Zhangfan@wanfangdata.com.cn
Renmin University Reprint Centre	http://www.confucius.cn.net	cmktg@public3.bta.net.cn
VIP Chinese Periodicals	http://www.tydata.com/	Not known

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